

Shakespeare vs. Seneca: Competing Visions of Human Dignity

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Critical examination of the possibility that Senecan tragedy influenced Shakespeare has moved through several distinct phases. Early interest in verbal parallels and analogous literary conventions met with resistance from critics such as G. K. Hunter who sought to emphasize Shakespeare's debt to medieval English drama, rather than classical Latin precedent. More recent scholarship, however, such as that of Robert S. Miola tends to present Shakespeare as well-versed in Senecan tragedy. Critics such as Gordon Braden, A. J. Boyle, and Colin Burrow, as well as Miola, have assembled illuminating studies of local allusions to Seneca's tragedies in specific plays. Most studies of Shakespeare's reception of Seneca tend to remain somewhat superficial, however, engaged with a myriad of discrete formal details, rather than diving deeper into more synthetic, probing questions of meaning, values, and worldview. How is Shakespeare the thinker responding to Seneca the thinker? I argue here that the most important distinction between the two playwrights is a difference of opinion about human dignity. Shakespeare's Christian sensibility leads him to undermine and overturn Seneca's more typically classical sense of human grandeur.¹

The study of Shakespeare's reception of Seneca began in earnest at the turn of the twentieth century. John Cunliffe assembled enthusiastic, somewhat undigested lists of verbal parallels between Senecan drama and Elizabethan tragedy. Not long after, Henry B. Charlton and F. L. Lucas made some effort to integrate and expand upon this initiative, identifying formal

¹ Auerbach argues that the advent of Christianity unsettled and ultimately dispelled long-standing classical assumptions about human dignity and literary decorum. See, e.g. Auerbach 2003, 39-40 on *humilis*. For Auerbach on Shakespeare, see the "The Weary Prince" (2003, 312-33).

conventions which Elizabethan dramatists seem to borrow from Seneca.² The most influential author in this regard, however, was T. S. Eliot. Eliot contributed a sympathetic introduction to a reprint of Thomas Newton's *Tenne Tragedies*, where he defended the value of these early English translations as poetry.³ He also drew attention to the possibility of a connection between Seneca and Shakespeare in an address at the Shakespeare Association in London, later published as an essay, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca."

A look at a few instances quickly shows the attraction of comparing specific passages, as well as some of the potential difficulties. Two quotations from Seneca's *Hippolytus* appear in Latin in Shakespeare's early revenge play, *Titus Andronicus*. When Titus learns that his daughter, Lavinia, was raped by Chiron and Demetrius, he speaks out angrily against what he sees as the injustice of the gods, that the two men should remain alive. "*Magni dominator poli / Tam lentus audis scelera, tam lentus vides?*" ("O ruler of the great heaven, / how are you so slow to hear crimes, so slow to see them?" (4.1.81-82). The outburst combines *Pha.* 671-72 with *Ep.* 107.11, suggesting an imperfectly-remembered commonplace. Earlier in the play Demetrius, consumed with lust for Lavinia, describes himself as in hell: "*per Stygia, per manes vehor*" ("I am carried through the region of [the river] Styx, through [the realm of the] shades," (1.1.635). This line simplifies and slightly mangles *Pha.* 1180, "*per Styga, per amnes igneos amens sequar*" ("I [Phaedra] will madly follow you [Hippolytus] through Styx, through fiery rivers").⁴ Unfortunately, however, for those who would see an open-and-shut case for Senecan influence, both of these Latin quotations appear in sections of the play which some critics ascribe to a collaborator, George Peele, rather than to Shakespeare himself.⁵

² For a thorough list of these conventions, see Miola 1992, 3.

³ See Eliot 1950.

⁴ For further discussion of these parallels, see Miola 1992, 13-15 as well as Burrow 2013, 183.

⁵ See Jackson 1979, 148-58 and Vickers 2002, 148-243, esp. 179.

Aside from *Titus Andronicus*, the two plays that have attracted the most attention from critics looking for the influence of Senecan tragedy are *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. Macbeth's hesitation to kill King Duncan, torn as he is between pity and ambition, plays out in soliloquies that recall not only Hamlet, as well as Brutus, but also Senecan antiheroes such as Medea, Clytemnestra, and Aegisthus.⁶ *King Lear* ends in a startling affront to theodicy, the death of Lear's innocent daughter, Cordelia, and contains passages that recall the frequent complaints about the cruelty and injustice of the gods that can be found throughout Seneca's tragedies.⁷ "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods. / They kill us for their sport" (4.1.38-39). Macbeth's famous soliloquy, "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow," evokes an analogous sense of nihilism and despair.⁸ Turning to specific passages, it is easy to multiply instances of striking parallels. Macbeth's conceit that his blood-stained hand will turn the sea red recalls Hippolytus's lament that the entire ocean could not cleanse him of the shame of Phaedra's proposition.⁹ Lear's vow to do "such things," he knows not what, "but they shall be / The terrors of the earth" (2.4.280-82), recalls Atreus's ominous vow that his revenge will be *nescioquid animo maius et solito amplius* ("something greater, larger than usual, beyond human limits," 267).

Nailing down a case for immediate influence can be difficult, however. For instance, Cunliffe finds an echo of Seneca's *Agamemnon* in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. As he plots to kill Banquo, Macbeth justifies his decision with a Senecan argument: "things bad begun make strong themselves by ill" (3.2.56). The line seems, at least, to allude to a turning point in one of

⁶ *Med.* 25-27, 40-43, 893-994; *Thy.* 176-204, 283-84, 324; *Ag.* 49-52, 108-15, 198-202, 228-43. See Belsey 1973 and Boyle 1997, 181-82 on *dubitatio*.

⁷ Cp. *Pha.* 959-88, 1238-43, 1271-72; *Oed.* 75, 667, 1042; *Med.* 29, 439-40, 1026-27; *Tro.* 51-57, 351-69, 524, 528, 743-44, 763, 768-79, 981-90, 1056; *Thy.* 122-35, 407, 1006-21, 1092-102; *Phoen.* 243-51; *Her. O.* 205-53, 299-302, 519, 645-46, 850-64. See Rosenmeyer 1989, 183 on what he calls Senecan *Schreirede*, "the heightened speech whereby the character (or the chorister) deflects his glance from his own person and frantically looks for sympathy in the presumptively 'sympathetic' universe."

⁸ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.5.19-28.

⁹ Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 2.2.58-62; cp. *Pha.* 715-18.

Clytemnestra's soliloquies, as she stiffens her resolve to kill her returning husband: *per scelera semper sceleribus tutum est iter* ("The safe way for crimes is always through crimes.") (115).

Cunliffe acknowledges, however, that variations on this aphorism also appear in numerous other contemporary plays, including Marston's *Malcontent*, Webster's *White Devil*, and Jonson's *Catiline*.¹⁰ As Jessica Winston has explained in the previous chapter, Senecan tragedy was so popular in Elizabethan England that Thomas Nashe could poke fun at the trend, accusing playwrights of copying Seneca "line by line and page by page." As a result, it is difficult to discern whether Shakespeare encountered Senecan tragedy directly or indirectly.

Even if Shakespeare did read Seneca's plays, another further question still remains. Did he read them in Latin, or in English translation? Gordon Braden dismisses the fourteener verse of the Newton translations as "numbing" and "infuriating." The idea that they might have inspired Shakespeare seems to him inconceivable. "We have at present no strong reason to think that they will ever be established as significant influences in the development of Elizabethan poetry, dramatic or otherwise" (Braden 1985, 173).¹¹ On the opposite side of the debate, Reuben Brower finds it "unlikely and beyond proof" that Shakespeare himself ever "read the full text in Latin of any play by Seneca." Instead, he argues, "the translators will be our surest guide" (1971, 148-49). M. L. Stapleton acknowledges that scholars tend to "betray embarrassment at what they perceive as bad poetry, bad playwriting, bad translation" (2000, 17). Nevertheless, he argues, "the Newtonians serve as our invaluable guides for Shakespeare's Senecan explorations, excavations, and conquests" (22).

Probably the best evidence for Shakespeare's familiarity with the 1581 translations is that he seems to parody them in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in the repertoire of the "rude

¹⁰ Cunliffe (1893, 24-5).

¹¹ Hunter is even more caustic. "It is a pity that the supposed historical significance of the 1581 volume has caused it to be twice reissued [i.e. in 1927 and 1964]." (1967, 194).

mechanicals.”¹² As Colin Burrow explains, the language of these mid-century Tudor translations “would have sounded slightly ‘antiqued’ even at the time of their composition” (2013, 172). By the turn of the century, however, as Shakespeare began writing, their prosody would have seemed downright laughably outmoded. Bottom proudly attests that he could “play Ercles rarely,” then declaims a few lines, as a taster: (1.2.31-8):

The raging rocks

And shivering shocks

Shall break the locks

Of prison-gates;

And Phibbus’ car

Shall shine from far

And make and mar

_____The foolish fates. (1.2.31-8)

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This spoof recalls two passages from John Studley’s translation of *Hercules Oetaeus*.¹³

“Phibbus’ car” appears in the opening two lines, *Sator deorum, cuius excussum manu / utraeque Phoebi sentient fulmen domus* (“Sire of the gods, whose hand launches the thunderbolts felt by both homes of Phoebus...”), which Studley translates, “O LORDE of Ghostes whose fyrye flashe (that forth thy hand doth shake) / Doth cause the trembling Lodges twain of Phoebus car to quake...”¹⁴ “Raging rocks” that “break the locks” appear in Deianira’s nurse’s boast about the scope of her magic powers, *habuere motum saxa, discussi fores / umbrasque Ditis* (“rocks have

¹² See Engel (1903) and Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Brooks (1979, lxii-lxiii, 139-45).

¹³ See Koeppel (1911, 190-21) and Miola (1992, 181 n. 8).

¹⁴ Seneca, *Hercules Oetaeus*, trans. Studley, 2: 193; cp. *Her. O.* 1-2.

started to move; I have shattered the doors and darkness of Dis”), which Studley renders as “the roring rocks have quaking sturd, and none thereat hath pusht. / Hell gloumy gates I have brast oape.”¹⁵ Shakespeare combines the first two lines of Studley’s translation, as if to signal his source, with a bit from the interior appropriate to the speaker in question: Bottom. Like Deianira’s nurse, Bottom is a lower-class character, claiming unusual power. He is attempting to help, in this case, Peter Quince with his casting decision, and, as with Deianira and her nurse, his solicitous attention does more harm than good. M. L. Stapleton argues that Bottom’s lines as Pyramus, as well, echo Alexander Neville’s translation of Seneca’s *Oedipus* (2000, 26). Searching for his beloved Thisbe, Pyramus bewails the obscurity of the encroaching darkness: “O grim-look’d night! O night with hue so black! / O night, which ever art, when day is not! / O night, o night! alack, alack, alack” (5.1.170-72). This bathetic lament resembles that of Neville’s Oedipus, as he curses the day: “O cursed fatall day, / O mischiefs great, O dreadfull times, O wretch, away, away.”¹⁶

Stapleton argues further that Peter Quince’s painfully awkward prologue, “If we offend, it is with our good will,” etc., is intended as a parody of the Newton translators’ introductions (5.1. 108-17). “Their laborious prefaces contain the same curious fusion of defensive humility and apologetic pride” (2000, 24-25). Nor is Shakespeare’s mockery of these authors necessarily limited to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Among several other, more minor instances, Robert Miola cites the example of the character Pistol, who appears in brief scenes scattered throughout Shakespeare’s second tetralogy of English history plays. “Pistol’s speech, a veritable catalogue of declamatory mannerisms, represents Shakespeare’s most obvious parody of Senecan style” (1992, 182). Miola also argues that Shakespeare’s critique of Senecan drama in *A Midsummer*

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 2: 210; cp. *Her. O.* 458-59.

¹⁶ Seneca, *Oedipus*, trans. Neville, 1:230. The line is interpolated into Oedipus’ final speech, 1042-61, without any clear-cut basis in the original Latin.

Night's Dream extends beyond a simple send-up of an obsolete poetic style. “Both of Bottom’s impersonations – Ercles and Pyramus – focus ridicule on Senecan self-dramatization, on the habit of taking one’s self too seriously” (1992, 187).

As Stapleton maintains, “parody is tribute” (2000, 26). Despite such evidence, however, towards the middle of the twentieth century, arguments for Seneca’s influence on Shakespeare began to meet with vehement objections. Whether Shakespeare’s exposure to Seneca was posited at first- or second-hand, in English or in Latin, claims about his reception of Senecan tragedy became targets for vociferous debunking. Willard Farnham and Howard Baker proposed that recurrent formal features such as tyrants, ghosts, and lurid violence might be more plausibly ascribed to the abiding influence of medieval English drama. In his monumental study of Elizabethan grammar school curricula, T. W. Baldwin found “no indication” that Shakespeare read Seneca in Latin, and no “evidence worth repeating” that he read Seneca in English, either (1944, 2:560).¹⁷ According to Baldwin, Shakespeare’s engagement with Senecan drama would not have been likely to have gone beyond schoolboy exercises, translating scattered *sententiae*.¹⁸ If Shakespeare was aware of Senecan tragedy in any deeper sense, it was at most indirectly, through intermediaries such as fellow playwrights. Baldwin (1947) argued further that Terence, not Seneca, was the model for Shakespeare’s characteristic five-act structure.¹⁹

The most categorical rejection of Seneca’s influence on Shakespeare, however, came from G. K. Hunter (1967; 1974; 1978, 159-73).²⁰ Like Farnham and Baker, but with much more bite, Hunter argued that conventions in Elizabethan drama such as stichomythia which appear to be derived from Senecan tragedy can instead be better understood as a legacy of traditional

¹⁷ For a more recent analogue of Baldwin (1944), see Gillespie (2004).

¹⁸ Contrast Eliot (1934, 37): “I think it is quite likely that Shakespeare read some of Seneca’s tragedies at school.”

¹⁹ Baldwin, *Five-Act Structure*.

²⁰ Cp. Bevington (1962).

English morality plays and mystery cycles. “If Seneca’s tragedies had not survived,” he writes, “some details would have had to be changed – but the overall picture [*sc.*, of Elizabethan drama] would not have been altered” (1967, 21). In his summaries of extant debate, Frederick Kiefer (1978; 1983; 1985) is more moderate, but on balance tends to side with Hunter.²¹ Kiefer urges the reader to be careful to distinguish between likely sources for academic drama, written in neo-Latin, and theatre such as Shakespeare’s which was written in English for a popular audience.²² Seneca thus comes across as a rarefied taste; an obscure companion of the Latinate University Wits.

Subsequent scholarship continues to call into question the severity of this critical rejection.²³ As Burrow explains, “there is an overwhelmingly strong *prima facie* case that Shakespeare read and was influenced by Seneca” (2013, 162). Reflecting on Baldwin’s account of Shakespeare’s education, Burrow concedes his argument about grammar school, but pushes back against his argument about Shakespeare. Surely Shakespeare’s “reading life,” he points out, did not end at fourteen. An argument based on school curricula has inherent limits. John Hazel Smith (1967) identifies fifty printings of Seneca’s tragedies before 1600. Bruce R. Smith (1978) catalogues thirty-seven translations of the plays into vernacular languages by the same date. “Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light” (2.2.401-2): when Shakespeare’s Polonius introduces a crew of traveling players as “the best actors in the world” (2.2.397), he cites Seneca as the most prestigious form of tragedy, the *ne plus ultra* of their art, and it seems unlikely that his opinion would have been altogether unconventional. Sir Philip Sidney, for instance, praises *Gorboduc* for “climbing to the height of Seneca his style” (1963, 38).

²¹ For other review essays, see Borgmeier (1978) and Frank (1997).

²² See Kiefer (1978, 18). On connections between *Titus Andronicus* and Cambridge productions of Senecan tragedies, see in contrast Smith (1988, 242-43).

²³ See Miola (1992), Braden (1985, 171 ff.), and Martindale and Martindale (1990, 30-44).

In retrospect, the underlying premise of the Farnham-Baker-Hunter line of argument also seems questionable. Simply to find a possible alternative source for a given trope in Elizabethan tragedy is not an adequate argument against Seneca's influence. Similar formal features can convey disparate sensibilities, depending on how they are used. Gordon Braden agrees with Hunter, for example, that passages akin to classical stichomythia can be found in medieval English plays. He also points out, however, that its instances in the English vernacular tradition feel very different from the intense verbal combat found in Seneca's tragedies. Stichomythic interaction in Senecan drama has a distinctive tone: it serves as a power struggle, "a test of ... self-possession" (1985, 181).²⁴ Commenting on Baker's criticism of Cunliffe, M. L. Stapleton observes what he calls a "troublesome fact" (2000, 29): although revenge can be found in medieval English drama, it is not an obsessive theme, the way it often is in Senecan tragedy; the emphasis lies elsewhere. Again, the feel, the import, of the material in question is very different.

Nevertheless, as Burrow observes, scepticism about the influence of Senecan tragedy, conscious or unconscious, continues to pervade much of Shakespeare scholarship. "Editors of Shakespeare's plays ... have been astonishingly reluctant to discuss Seneca in their introductions, or to record even evident and well-established parallels in their notes" (2013, 163). Burrow is probably right to suspect two unjustified biases at work, resulting in this curious critical blindness: among Shakespeareans, an entrenched view of Shakespeare as an untutored, quintessentially English folk artist, 'warbling his native woodnotes wild';²⁵ and, among classicists, a longstanding prejudice against the aesthetics themselves of Senecan drama, as

²⁴ Cp. Martindale and Martindale (1990, 31), as well as Boyle (1997, 163).

somehow inferior to Attic and Augustan precedent.²⁵ Seneca is seen in comparison as too dissonant, garish, brutal, grotesque, hyperbolic, rhetorical, etc.

Shakespeare and Seneca both operate outside neoclassical ideals of clarity, order, and decorum: Winckelmann's *edle Einfalt und stille Größe* ("noble simplicity and quiet grandeur"). Shakespeare's disorder, however, has long been represented as charming, naïve, and proto-Romantic, whereas Seneca's as a decline, a failure to live up to his classical predecessors. To posit Seneca as a source for Shakespeare, Shakespeare as embracing Silver Age Latin drama, disrupts this vision of literary history. Thus, perhaps, critics' reluctance to look deeper into Shakespeare's debt to Seneca. Happily, in recent years, the aesthetic merits of Senecan drama have come in for a reappraisal, at least among classicists.²⁶ Nevertheless, among Shakespeareans, Seneca's *Frangicus* remains at present still surprisingly unfamiliar: a vaguely disreputable, poorly understood figure.

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The reaction against early studies of Senecan influence did have some salutary effect, however, insofar as it prompted reconsideration of the methods themselves of source-study. Lists of comparable passages such as those compiled by Cunliffe, Charlton, and Lucas may be a useful starting point, but they are not on their own an adequate guide to the complex interaction between one author and another. Hunter is wrong to dismiss Seneca's influence altogether, but he is right to want more than a bare list of parallels, and to suggest that studies of reception should consider the interaction between multiple texts and authors, rather than focusing on a single source in artificially-imposed isolation. The critics who then have best responded to this challenge are Gordon Braden and Robert Miola. Of these two, Braden is the more cohesive and

²⁵ "Then to the well-trod stage anon, / If Jonsons learned Sock be on, / Or sweetest Shakespear fancies childe, Warble his native Wood-notes wilde[.]" Milton, "L'Allegro," 131-34.

²⁶ For further thoughts on the merits of Seneca's aesthetic choices, see Boyle (1997, 15-31), as well as the sources listed in Stapleton (2000, 136 n. 36) and Burrow (2013, 274).

penetrating, but he omits Shakespeare almost entirely, in favour of a broader discussion of European Renaissance tragedy. Miola moves through Shakespeare's works systematically, play-by-play, identifying local allusions and adaptations of Senecan literary conventions. However, he tends to avoid large-scale, synthetic comparison of the two authors. In fact, Miola at times outright denies any systematic engagement between Shakespeare 'the thinker' and Seneca 'the thinker'.²⁷ "Shakespeare's debt to Senecan drama," he writes, "is principally a matter of style, a matter of rhetorical pose and gesture, replete with a cluster of familiar images and motifs" (1985, 193).²⁸

Miola's conclusions belie this statement: he depicts Shakespeare as fairly consistently rejecting what he calls the Senecan "style of selfhood" (1985, 193). Nevertheless, he does tend to emphasize small-scale questions of form. It seems likely, therefore, that the next step in the analysis of Seneca's influence on Shakespeare will be the integration of these two approaches, Braden's and Miola's.²⁹ Does Braden's broad-strokes argument hold true for Shakespeare? As Braden maintains, "the more visibly Senecan features of Senecan rhetoric are not just a repertoire of varied effects, but have a corporate coherence as instruments of a particular style of selfhood; and at that level there is a serious affinity between Senecan tragedy and Renaissance tragedy" (1985, 66).

What is needed, in other words, is a study of Shakespeare's engagement with Senecan subjectivity. What vision of the world, of the self, does Senecan tragedy present? And how does Shakespeare respond to that vision? At the end of his seminal essay, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," Eliot issues what amounts to a critical challenge. "The influence of Seneca

²⁷ For Shakespeare as a "thinker," see Nuttall (2007).

²⁸ Cp. Emrys Jones (1977, 272) who suggests that "Shakespeare's use of Seneca" is "more a matter of glancingly rapid effects than of a laborious working out of correspondences."

²⁹ See, e.g. Boyle (1997, 167-92) for an analysis of "ideological indebtedness" to Seneca in Renaissance tragedy in general, including Shakespeare.

on Elizabethan drama has been exhaustively studied in its formal aspect, and in the borrowing and adapting of phrases and situations; the penetration of Senecan sensibility would be much more difficult to trace” (1934, 53-54).” And in fact, turning back to Braden, perhaps the quickest way to understand his account of the influence of Seneca on Renaissance tragedy is to see it as precisely the project which Eliot imagines. Braden sets out to identify what, exactly, “Senecan sensibility” might be, and then to trace its “penetration” in Renaissance tragedy.

Eliot begins by rejecting the idea that Shakespeare “deliberately took a ‘view of life’ from Seneca.” For purposes of comparison, he cites the example of Dante and St. Aquinas: Dante had “one coherent system of thought behind him,” “the system of St. Thomas, to which his poem corresponds point to point.” Not so Shakespeare; Seneca did not provide him with “a ‘philosophy’.” What can be identified, however, as a legacy of Senecan tragedy is what Eliot calls “a new attitude,” “the attitude of self-dramatization assumed by some of Shakespeare’s heroes at moments of tragic intensity” (1934, 38). This “stoical attitude” is “the reverse of Christian humility,” and it “culminates,” as he sees it, in his own time, in “the attitude of Nietzsche.” It is “the refuge for the individual in an indifferent or hostile world too big for him” (1934, 47-48).

As examples, Eliot cites various heroes in the plays of Marston and Chapman, as well as Shakespeare’s Coriolanus, Mark Antony, and Othello. He also singles out Othello for more detailed treatment. Confronted by an obvious error, his ill-considered murder of his own innocent wife, Othello adopts “an *aesthetic* rather than a moral attitude, dramatizing himself against his environment.” His focus is not on his victim, Desdemona, but instead on his own self-esteem, his perception of his own dignity. “He takes in the spectator, but the human motive is primarily to take in himself.” In his final speech, Othello is not primarily, as he might seem,

acknowledging his own guilt, or even admitting his own human fallibility, but instead is “cheering himself up,” “endeavouring to escape reality” (1934, 39). He tries to re-embiggen himself; to see himself once again as powerful, god-like.³⁰ Eliot sees this effort as “pathetic,” and he suggests that Shakespeare shares his perspective. “I do not believe that any writer has ever exposed this *bovarysme*, the human will to see things as they are not, as clearly as Shakespeare” (1934, 40).

Braden’s striking achievement is not only to develop this brief sketch of a Senecan “attitude” into a more fully developed account of Senecan “autarkic selfhood,” but also to explain its connection to Seneca’s philosophy. Braden proposes that the Stoic wise men such as Cato and Socrates whom Seneca exalts in his philosophical treatises and the furious, unrestrained avengers such as Medea and Thyestes whom he places at the heart of his tragedies are in fact variations on a single theme, θυμός, the competitive drive which St. Augustine criticizes as *libido dominandi* (“lust for dominance”), and Nietzsche celebrates as *der Wille zur Macht* (“the will to power”). Both types, the philosophical sage as well as the tragic antihero, strive to achieve what is, in the end, an unattainable fantasy: absolute, unquestioned, and unassailable personal autonomy, akin to that of a Roman emperor. They want to be, as Braden says, ‘autarkic’: themselves (αὐτός) the origin (ἀρχή) of everything about themselves.³¹

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“Imperial aggression and Stoic retreat are both informed by a drive to keep the self’s boundaries under its own control ... Stoicism is in this regard but the inner form of imperialism” (Braden 1985, 23). According to Braden, Stoicism is not the opposite of *furor*, but instead its “internalization”: “one manifestation of drives that, swerving in another direction, lead to the rage of Seneca’s madmen” (1985, 21). Thus it makes sense that Medea can adopt in earnest the

³⁰ “A noble spirit embiggens the smallest man.” Springfield town motto, *The Simpsons*, Season 7, episode 16: “Lisa the Iconoclast.”

³¹ For the concept of “autarkic selfhood,” see Braden (1985, 23–303).

sententiae of a Stoic, or that Hamlet oscillates between “declamatory fury” and “relentless self-laceration” (1985, 30). Brutus and Cleopatra only seem to be opposites; the Stoic and the *femina furens* are in fact two sides of the same coin, two versions of the same preoccupation: an obsession with personal honour. “Stoicism is the natural alternative to revenge because it is a twin endeavour, a complementary strategy for establishing the self’s belief in its own dignity and power” (1985, 218-19).³²

In his discussion of Seneca’s influence on Shakespeare’s tragedies, Miola shows that this “passionate style of selfhood” leads to what he calls “grand, if solipsistic, apotheosis,” as well as “cosmic disaster” (1992, 193). A character such as Othello or Lear manages to see himself for a time as god-like, titanic, only to have that delusional sense of power prove false, in the end, as he confronts the unhappy consequences of his mistakes. Miola’s argument intersects here with Eliot’s, as well as Braden’s: the insatiable ambition of the “Senecan self” leads to what Eliot calls *bovarysme*, and Braden, “a fantasy of individual autonomy” (1985, 57). Reality will not accommodate the tragic protagonist’s sense of himself, so he opts instead for a different, more private reality, one in which he can be larger than life, even if only temporarily.³³ Turning to Shakespeare’s last plays, Miola argues that these final tragicomedies present a deliberately opposed moral vision: “a change of heart, usually articulated as a repudiation of the Senecan self” (1992, 188). This “pivot” or “turning,” he adds, occurs in “a Christianized context of sin and repentance.” “Individual apotheosis gives way to humble contrition, tragic disaster to comic reconciliation” (1992, 193).³⁴

³² See also Stapleton (2000) for Shakespeare’s engagement with the Senecan convention of the *femina furens*.

³³ Cp. Bromwich (2010) on other tragic heroes in Shakespeare’s plays such as Macbeth and Lear tending, like Othello, towards what Eliot calls *bovarysme*: self-aggrandizing self-deception.

³⁴ Cp. Boyle (1997, 173-179).

Braden for his part discerns a rejection of Seneca's *Weltanschauung* even earlier in Shakespeare's career, in *Hamlet*. Shakespeare introduces a new and alien element, Christianity, into the progress of a Senecan revenge plot, and well-nigh brings it to a crashing halt. Fear of guilt in the eyes of a Christian God prevents Hamlet from participating in the Senecan moral universe. "The prospect of Stoic withdrawal, no less than that of murderous action, spawns an unmanageable anxiety." Hamlet is "excluded from the satisfactions of either revenge or Stoicism – and those satisfactions subtend a whole universe of human values" (1985, 220). In an essay on *Thyestes* and *Hamlet*, Eric Dodson-Robinson argues still more strongly for "a striking contrast between Seneca's and Shakespeare's dramatic visions": "a programmatic challenge to the worldview and values of Senecan tragedy." Both tragedies begin with something like original sin.³⁵ In Seneca's *Thyestes*, however, crime begets crime, without hope for improvement, whereas in *Hamlet*, Christian virtues enable some degree of redemption. "The brotherly forgiveness exchanged between Hamlet and Laertes inverts the dual prayers for vengeance uttered by Atreus and his brother at the conclusion of *Thyestes*."

All of these critics' conclusions suggest that further analysis of Shakespeare's reception of Seneca will require making sense of what Dodson-Robinson identifies as "axiological" differences. Shakespeare and Seneca do not share the same values. Although they may use the same trope or dramatic convention, even the same phrase, their aesthetic choices are informed by different assumptions about morality, and this incongruity of sensibility can give their use of similar formal features a very different effect, in context. Another, more arresting way of making this basic point would be to say that Shakespeare and Seneca fundamentally disagree about the nature of human dignity, and that this disagreement affects their art. What is it about a human

³⁵ Cf. Gillies (2013) on original sin in *Hamlet*.

being that is or can be *dignus*, that is, worthy of approval? What qualities do we admire in ourselves, or in others?

As Christopher Star explains, Seneca's Stoicism was attractive to his contemporaries, as well as accessible, because he describes "personal *imperium*" metaphorically, in the familiar language of "military and political *imperium*," but casts it as superior: more respectable and more desirable (2012, 23). Matthew Roller attributes this reorientation of aristocratic Roman ambition to a lack of opportunity within the Empire for more traditional advancement: "the unavailability of independent military commands for most aristocrats, along with the disappearance of concomitant military honors" (2001, 66).³⁶ What is admirable, however, in Seneca's thought is still, as it was for Nero, or for most other Romans, to be in control, in command. Self-rule is the imperative, the *summum bonum*. To be 'autarkic' is the aim: in the words of Shakespeare's Coriolanus, to "stand, / as if a man were author of himself" (5.3.35-36); even if that independence requires horrifying, pitiless cruelty; even if it means self-destruction.

This vision of human dignity is precisely what Shakespeare sets out to upend. For Shakespeare, Seneca's tendency to idealize untrammelled independence does not seem liberating, as it did to Marlowe or to Chapman, but instead tragically misleading. Human beings are naturally and inextricably dependent on each other; to attempt to stand apart from all others, like Coriolanus, "a lonely dragon" (3.3.30), is a doomed and even foolish enterprise. Characters such as Shylock or Malvolio who strive for imperious, pitiless control over others end up in situations that are not only unhappy, but also ignominious.³⁷ They end up contemptible, weak, even laughable: from their perspective, an outcome very literally worse than death.³⁸ In the

³⁶ For similarities, in this respect, between Imperial Rome and Elizabethan England, see Rebhorn (1990).

³⁷ See Boyle (1997, 183-84) on revenge backfiring in Renaissance adaptations of *Medea* and *Thyestes*.

³⁸ Cleopatra and Brutus both kill themselves in order to avoid being led in triumph.

words of Alexander Pope, “there are some who would rather be *wicked* than *ridiculous*.”³⁹ True dignity consists instead, paradoxically, in the deliberate recognition of human limitation. What Shakespeare admires is not brutal dominance, but instead what is aptly described in Christian theology as *κένωσις* (“self-emptying”): the voluntary surrender or delegation of individual agency.⁴⁰ The height of human dignity, as Shakespeare sees it, is the power to relinquish power itself as an ethical aim; to give up the Senecan dream of self-mastery in the interests of a greater good: compassion.⁴¹

In ancient Rome, *dignitas* was all but inseparable from social standing. In its most precise sense, *dignitas* denoted the potential to participate in the *cursus honorum*. It is the social capital, the broad-based approval, necessary in order to participate in Roman political life.⁴² Its sense is thus somewhat different from that of its English cognate, “dignity.” For example, authors such as Cicero, Quintilian, and Livy use the term *dignitas* not only to refer to a personal quality, but also as a synonym for high political office, or as short-hand for an office-holder himself, as in the English term, “dignitary.”⁴³ *Dignitas* as an individual attribute is grounded, in the final analysis, in the ability to exercise political power. That is to say, in more direct language, what is admirable, *dignus*, in a human being is ultimately his capacity to command other people: to dominate them, master them, force them to his will. Other personal characteristics such as noble birth, martial prowess, and masculinity (*virtus*) are also worthy of respect, insofar as they enable this kind of *imperium*. But their value is secondary, instrumental. Qualities such as being male,

³⁹ Letter to the Earl of Burlington, March 7, 1731.

⁴⁰ See Phil. 2:5-11 for the New Testament touchstone of this aspect of Christian theology.

⁴¹ Seneca himself argues against *miseritordia* in his essay *De Clementia*.

⁴² For further analysis, see Rosen (2012). The Roman sense that human worth depends on the ability to exercise some degree of political agency might well seem disturbing, in its implications. Are the powerless therefore worthless? Nevertheless, for classical authors, *dignitas* tends to be inseparable from political influence. See, e.g. Balsdon (1960) on the difficulty of reconciling *dignitas* with *otium*.

⁴³ For instances, see *dignitas* in Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*.

high-born, wealthy, well-spoken, or successful in battle are all merely means to a more important end: relative goods, rather than absolute. What matters most ~~_, at the end of the day, is_~~ instead, a more private, internal sense of individual agency. The aim above all, even the aim of political office itself, is to be able to see oneself as the agent, rather than the acted-upon; ~~the doer, rather than the done unto.~~

Seneca's ingenious breakthrough, both in his philosophy and in his tragedies, is to recognize that this characteristic Roman craving for individual control, the drive that St. Augustine calls *libido dominandi*, can conceivably be satisfied in other ways than the traditional patrician pursuit of high office at home and military conquest abroad. The desire to feel powerful can, he imagines, be fulfilled internally, without the perils and the complications of involving other people. *imperare sibi*, he writes, *maximum imperium est* ("To rule oneself is the greatest empire," ~~)(~~Ep. 113.31). Under pressure from increasingly erratic and domineering Julio-Claudian rule, Seneca found in Greek philosophy what must have felt like a welcome escape-hatch. Hellenistic schools of thought such as Stoicism and Epicureanism provided a pressure release, an alternative to the intense, dog-eat-dog Roman world of competition for command over others.

But is the autonomy that these systems promise truly attainable? In his essays and epistles, Seneca argues for the practicability of Hellenistic ethics, making few concessions. As proof of the possibility of radical self-control, he cites the example of historic figures such as Cato, Socrates, and the Greek philosopher Stilbo. He urges his correspondent, Lucilius, to retire from public affairs, in keeping with the precepts of Epicureanism. In his tragedies, however, writing about figures of Greek legend, Seneca gives much freer rein to his doubts. Self-possessed characters who maintain exemplary control over their own emotions seem few and far between.

As Phaedra complains, *quid ratio possit? Vicit ac regnat furor* (“What can reason do? Madness has conquered and rules me.”) (184). When her attendant urges her to suppress her desire for her stepson, Phaedra replies point-blank, *quae memores scio / vera esse, nutrix; sed furor cogit sequi / peiora* (“I know that what you say is true, nurse; but madness forces me to follow the worse path.”) (177-79). Variations on this *domina-nutrix* debate occur in *Medea* and *Agamemnon*, as well as other tragedies: Jocasta with Oedipus in *Oedipus*, Ulysses with Andromache in *Troades*.⁴⁴ Stoic suppression of the passions figures less as a lived philosophy than as a hypothetical foil; its maxims are articulated, but then disregarded as impracticable.⁴⁵

The manifest tension between Seneca’s tragedies and his professed philosophy has led over time to what Gregory Staley describes as “two schools of Senecan criticism: a moralistic school which assumes that the plays are a vehicle for Stoic teaching and a sceptical school which sees them instead as utterly unconcerned about morality or even hostile to it” (2010, 5). One especially prominent example of what Staley calls the “sceptical school” is Alessandro Schiesaro’s analysis of *Thyestes*, where Schiesaro argues that Atreus, the antagonist, “attracts the audience beyond and even against the purview of their ethical beliefs” (2006, 127). “There can be no doubt,” he maintains, “where our aesthetic allegiances lie: with Atreus’ energetic *poesis*, his mastery of words and puns, his ruthless determination to plot, stage, and act his revenge” (2006, 122). He is “cunning, funny, articulate, simply irresistible” (2006, 117). Schiesaro compares Atreus to Aaron in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, in whom, citing Jonathan Bate, he discerns a similar “satanic drollery.”⁴⁶ Like Atreus, Aaron is a “master of words” who becomes,

⁴⁴ *Pha.* 100-357; *Med.* 150-6, 173-74, 381, 558-59; *Ag.* 125-43, 203, 225; cp. *Oed.* 81-86; *Tro.* 785-813; *Phoen.* 347-49.

⁴⁵ For further discussion, see Boyle (1997, 157-58) on “passion-restraint” scenes in Seneca and Shakespeare.

⁴⁶ Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Bate, 11; cited in Schiesaro (2006, 111).

in effect, a playwright-within-a-play: he “engineers the larger part of the plot” and is “fully conscious of his metatheatrical role” (Schiesaro 2006, 72).

Within Shakespeare studies, the best-known analogue of Schiesaro’s reading of Atreus is probably Stephen Greenblatt’s uneasy fascination with Iago in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. Much as Schiesaro with Atreus, Greenblatt sees in Iago an image of the playwright himself. “In *Othello*, Shakespeare seems to acknowledge, represent, and explore his affinity to the malicious improviser” (1980, 252). Shakespeare “possessed a limitless talent for entering into the consciousness of another” (1980, 252); so, too, Iago is “master of the vertiginous confounding of self and other” (1980, 229 n. 19). He is “demonically sensitive” (1980, 235), “an inventor of comic narrative” (1980, 234) capable of “brilliant improvisation” (1980, 246). “Iago is fully aware of himself as an improviser and revels in his ability to manipulate his victims” (1980, 233). He is “linked to the playwright or at least to the Vice-like ‘presenter’ of a play” (1980, 298 n. 16). Greenblatt is careful to maintain that “even in *Othello*, Iago is not the playwright’s only representation of himself” (1980, 252). Nevertheless, the line blurs. Over the course of Greenblatt’s account, Shakespeare and Iago become almost indistinguishable: Shakespeare, like Iago, is “the supreme purveyor of ‘empathy’, the fashioner of narrative selves, the master improviser” (1980, 253).

William Blake famously said of Milton that he was “of the Devil’s party without knowing it.” Reviving what he calls the “moralistic school” of Senecan criticism, Staley, however, strongly objects to this tendency, ~~like Greenblatt~~, to identify, as Greenblatt does, an author with his most glamorous villain. Schiesaro, he protests, allows “Atreus ‘the playwright’ to define Seneca’s theory of tragedy.” “Would we allow Macbeth ‘the critic’ to interpret Shakespeare?” (2010, 120). Seneca in his account is more in control of his material than

Schiesaro suggests. “Whereas Schiesaro,” he explains, “sees Seneca’s plays as the mad poet’s dreams, I read them instead as the analyst’s interpretations” (2010, 8). Seneca’s tragedies are designed to illustrate the disastrous effects of unchecked emotion. “Seneca’s plays regularly depict characters who are angry, frightened, or even in love, for passion was the Stoic explanation for the events traditionally considered tragic” (2010, 7).⁴⁷ Turning to Milton studies, an analogue of Staley’s reading of Senecan tragedy might be Stanley Fish’s response to Blake in *Surprised by Sin*. Milton’s ostensible sympathy for Satan early on in *Paradise Lost* is in fact a ruse. “The reader who falls before the lures of Satanic rhetoric displays again the weakness of Adam.” In leading the reader to recognize his own human “infirmity,” Milton aims to bring him “first to self-knowledge, and then to contrition” (Fish 1997, 38).

Gordon Braden presents a more troubling synthesis. Seneca’s tragic villains, like Nero and Caligula, are not as different from his Stoic *sapientes* as either Schiesaro or Staley seem to imagine. “Both insist on absolute control; the one destroying whatever resists his conquest, the other surrendering all interest in whatever falls outside his power ... Senecan tragedy, dominated by versions of these two postures, is an exploration of their common ground: the self which will not deal with external reality except on terms of utter dominance” (1984, 286). Atreus’s s exultant revenge in Seneca’s *Thyestes* and Cato’s triumphant suicide in Seneca’s epistles are not altogether incongruent. Both express the same core desire for control; both are at once an ostensible self-apotheosis and an appalling self-annihilation. “Senecan tragedy is the tragedy of the success of the human drive for moral and personal self-sufficiency, the drive for an autonomous selfhood that is subject to no order beyond itself. At their most genuinely harrowing, Seneca’s tragedies reveal that very success as a kind of horror” (1984, 285). The recurrent

⁴⁷ For a fascinating reading of Macbeth’s “brief candle” soliloquy, connecting it to a plausible Senecan source, Seneca’s discussion of *hic humanae vitae mimus* in *Ep.* 80.7, see Staley (2010, 9). Cf. Bromwich (2010, 143-45) on Macbeth in this speech, like Eliot’s Othello, “cheering himself up.”

murder of children in Senecan tragedy, as in *Macbeth*, serves as a symbol of a “destructive cycle” which “spirals outward of its own logic to claim by the end something close to everything.” Here, however, Braden draws an important distinction between Seneca and Shakespeare. Shakespeare, he maintains, is much more thoroughly sceptical about this ‘style of selfhood’: “much more profound and clearer” in showing its limits and drawbacks. “To master life this way is to empty it.” Senecan drama “never quite steps outside” its antiheroes’ all-consuming “fantasies of vindictive fulfilment” (1984, 289). Shakespeare, in contrast, “never loses touch with the reality that ultimately resists and circumscribes any one man’s will” (1984, 290).

Like Seneca’s own tragedies, Shakespeare’s plays call into question Seneca’s philosophy, and by extension, the contemporary movement that he helped to inspire: Neostoicism. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, Leonato denounces the value of the conventional Stoic *consolatio* in no uncertain terms. “Cease thy counsel” (5.1.3), he tells Antonio, and again, “give me no counsel” (5.1.31).

I pray thee peace, I will be flesh and blood;
 For there was never yet philosopher
 That could endure the toothache patiently,
 However they have writ the style of gods,
 And made a push at chance and sufferance. (5.1.34-38)

Leonato refuses to hear any such “preceptual medicine” (5.1.24), any talk of “patience” (5.1.10, 19) unless the would-be “comforter” (5.1.6) has suffered, exactly as he has, the loss of a beloved child.

No, no; 'tis all men's office to speak patience
To those that wring under the load of sorrow
But no man's virtue nor sufficiency
To be so moral when he shall endure
The like himself. Therefore give me no counsel[.] (5.1.27-31)

The same insistence that “philosophy” is useless also appears in *King John*, when Constance believes that she has lost her son, Arthur. “Patience, good lady!” (3.3.22) King Philip exhorts her. “No,” she cries. “I defy all counsel” (3.3.23). Cardinal Panulph intervenes, and she changes tack. “Preach some philosophy,” she asks, “to make me mad” (3.3.51).

For not being mad but sensible of grief,
My reasonable part produces reason,
How I may be deliver'd of these woes,
And teaches me to kill or hang myself. (3.3.53-6)

This type of exchange appears in *Romeo and Juliet*, as well, when Romeo learns that he has been banished. “I'll give thee armor to keep off that word,” Friar Laurence reassures him: “Adversity's sweet milk, philosophy” (3.3.54-6). Romeo, however, is far from appeased. “Hang

up philosophy!” he cries. “Unless philosophy can make a Juliet, / Displant a town, reverse a prince’s doom, / It helps not, it prevails not; talk no more” (3.3.57-60).⁴⁸

When achieved Stoicism does appear in Seneca’s tragedies, it is, as in his prose, in the form of a defiant, fearless death, showing no outward sign of pain or emotional distress. The most striking instance of such self-mastery occurs in the pseudo-Senecan *Hercules Oetaeus*, when Hercules helps to burn himself alive. *Nullus erumpit sonus* (“no sound burst from him”), Philoctetes recounts: *o durum iecur!* (“O tough heart!”) (1731-32). True to Seneca’s admiration of agency, the author emphasizes Hercules’s s activity, even as he is consumed (1740-44):

inter vapores positus et flammae minas
immotus, inconcussus, in neutrum latus
correpta torquens membra adhortatur, monet,
gerit aliquid ardens. omnibus fortem addidit
animum ministris: urere ardentem putes.

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Enveloped by the heat and the menacing flames, yet unmoved, unshaken, not twisting onto either side with his burning limbs, he gave encouragement and counsel, and remained active, all ablaze. He strengthened the courage of all his attendants: you would think him burning while being burnt! (1740-4)

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Hercules’s s dignity, represented here by his ascension to godhead, depends on his ability to remain powerful, in command, rather than a passive victim of the flames.⁴⁹ A similar emphasis

⁴⁸ See also Bolingbroke’s response to John of Gaunt’s advice about his exile in Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 1.3.258-309.

on individual agency can be seen in Seneca's commentary on the suicides of Socrates and Cato the Younger in his essays and epistles, as well as his account of the executions of Astyanax and Polyxena in *Troades*. Astyanax *superbit* ("was fiercely proud," 1089); he mounts the wall *intrepidus animo* ("with a fearless spirit," 1093). *non flet e turba omnium / qui fletur* ("Of the whole crowd, he did not weep who was wept for," 1099-1100). *sponte desiluit sua* ("He leapt down of his own accord," 1102). Polyxena likewise refuses to be cowed: *audax virago non tulit retro gradum; / conversa ad ictum stat truci vultu ferox* ("the dauntless heroine [lit., man-like woman] did not step back; / she stood facing the blow, frowning defiance," 1151-52). Even as she succumbs to a massive wound (*vulnus ingens*), she still finds a way to strike out at her enemy, Achilles. *moriens adhuc / deponit animos: cecidit, ut Achilli gravem / factura terram, prona et irato impetu* ("in dying she still maintained her pride: she fell, so as to make the earth heavy for Achilles, face downward and with angry force," 1157-59).

Shakespeare's Roman plays include several important suicides, all of which in some respect evoke this Senecan template. In each case, however, Shakespeare introduces some element, comic or ironic, which calls into question the ostensible dignity of the suicide. Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra* is the most obvious example. He asks his servant Eros to kill him, but his servant kills himself instead. He then falls on his own sword, but does not die straightaway. Nor like Cato does he then proceed to tear out his own innards.⁵⁰ Instead, he begs his attendants to finish him off. However, they, too, refuse, like Eros. Finally he is taken to Cleopatra; he asks to speak, but she interrupts him, railing at Fortune. Although he boasts of conquering himself, he seems in practice very far from in command. His last line is, "I can no more" (4.15.61). Later, when Cleopatra, too, decides to kill herself, her high-flying appropriation of Stoic tropes, "Now I

⁴⁹ For Philoctetes' complete description of Hercules' death, see *Her. O.* 1693-1755.

⁵⁰ Plut. *Cat. Mi.* 70.6

am marble-constant” (5.2.239), etc., is interrupted by an encounter with a crass peasant: the “clown” who brings her the asp (“worm”), and who insists on making indecorous, phallic jokes about “joy o’th’ worm” (5.2.278). In *Julius Caesar*, when Cassius kills himself, it is because his near-sightedness leads him to misread the outcome of a crucial battle. “Alas,” Titinius says, “thou hast misconstrued everything” (5.3.84). Brutus also kills himself, but only after admitting that he believes that suicide is intrinsically dishonourable. His death thus comes across as an inconsistency, an expression of weakness. It is an act that he himself calls “cowardly and vile” (5.1.103).⁵¹

Throughout his plays, Seneca repeatedly depicts Epicurean withdrawal from ambition, wealth, travel, and cities as the best possible mode of life.⁵² Like Stoic suicide, Epicurean retirement from public life is presented as an escape from outside influence, with its attendant emotional distress: a retreat into a promised land of careless autonomy. The cure for the ills of boundless ambition is to withdraw from civilization itself: *non illum avarae mentis inflammat furor / qui se dicavit montium insontem iugis* (“no madness of greed inflames the man who devotes himself innocently to the high hills.”) (486-87). Retreat from society preserves individual freedom, individual self-control: *autarkeia*. Hippolytus proclaims, *non alia magis est libera et vitio carens / ... / quam quae relictus moenibus silvas amat* (“No other life is more free and blameless ... than that which abandons city walls and loves the forests.”) (483-85). Nevertheless, no prominent character in Seneca’s tragedies ever manages to shuck it all in this fashion, escape the entanglements of high position, and walk away from the imbroglios on-stage. Hippolytus attempts to do so, like Shakespeare’s Timon in *Timon of Athens*, or Duke Senior in

⁵¹ For the connection between Shakespeare’s account of Brutus’s shifting opinion about suicide and what he found in his main source, North’s translation of Plutarch’s *Lives*, see Braden (2014, 44-47).

⁵² *Pha.* 204-15, 483-552, 1123-42; *Oed.* 671-7, 687-93; *Med.* 301-29, 608-69, 260-74; *Thy.* 340-470; *Her. O.* 125-201, 325-28, 604-99.

As You Like It.⁵³ Despite himself, however, Hippolytus is drawn back in; like Seneca himself, he finds himself subject, with or without his consent, to the whims and cruelty of contemporary court politics.⁵⁴ The only exception might be said to be the indistinct commoners of the Chorus. In *Thyestes*, the Chorus vows that it is content with its own anonymity (391-97):

Stet quicumque volet potens

aulae culmine lubrico:

me dulcis saturret quies.

obscuro positus loco

leni perfruar otio,

nullis nota Quiritibus

aetus per tacitum fluat.

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Who wishes may stand in power on a palace's slippery peak: let sweet repose sate me. Set in an obscure place, let me bask in gentle leisure; unknown to any Quirites, let my life flow on through peace. (391-7)

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Recalled from banishment by his brother, Thyestes himself, in keeping with the Chorus's perspective, considers going back to his exile in the woods.⁵⁵ *clarus hic regni nitor / fulgore non est quod oculos falso auferat* ("There is no reason for this bright lustre of kingship to blind your eyes with its false glitter.") (414-15). Nevertheless, he accepts his brother's fatal invitation to return to court. In effect, he enacts the reverse of an Epicurean withdrawal.

⁵³ For Shakespeare's perspective on Epicurean retirement, see Gray (2014).

⁵⁴ See Boyle (1997, 32) for further discussion of this comparison.

⁵⁵ *Thy.* 404-70.

For the most part, what we find in Seneca's tragedies is neither self-possessed Stoic suicide, nor its more moderate analogue, Epicurean retirement from public life, but instead, the same kind of all-consuming competition for political authority which Seneca repudiates, over and over again, as pointless and unsatisfying. The Chorus in *Thyestes* asks, *quis vos exagitat furor, / alteris dare sanguinem / et sceptrum scelere aggredi?* ("What is this frenzy that drives you to spill your blood by turns and beset the sceptre with crime?" ~~(349-51)~~). Then it launches into well-worn Stoic paradoxes.⁵⁶ The true king is the Stoic *sapiens*, and he does not need wealth or military might ~~(348-52)~~:-

*rex est qui posuit metus
et diri mala pectoris;
quem non ambitio impotens
et numquam stabilis faovr
vulgi praeceptis movet[.]*

A king is one who is rid of fear and the evil of an ugly heart; one that no wilful ambition or the ever shifting favour of the hasty mob can affect. ~~(348-52)~~

But is it so easy to rest content? As Phaedra's attendant observes, *quod non potest vult posse qui nimum potest* ("he who is able to do too much wants to be able to do what he cannot do." ~~(215)~~).

Quisquis secundis rebus exultat nimis

⁵⁶ *Thy.* 340-403.

fluitque luxu, semper insolita appetite.

tunc illa magnae dira fortunae comes

subit libido[.]

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Those who grow too extravagant through prosperity, overflowing with luxury, are always seeking out the unusual. Then lust creeps in, that dire companion of good fortune. (204-7)

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In the world of Senecan tragedy, almost no-one is ever content to share political power. As

Thyestes says, *non capit regnum duos* (“a throne has no room for two.”)(444). The same principle holds true in the domestic sphere, as well. Aegisthus warns Clytemnestra: *Nec regna socium ferre nec taedae sciunt* (“Neither thrones nor marriages can endure a partner.”)(259).

Wives such as Medea, Clytemnestra, and Deianira refuse to share their husband with a mistress.

Medea is incredulous at the very idea: *regias egone ut faces / inulta patiar?* (“Am I to endure this royal marriage unavenged?”)(398-99).

Thus, in the world of Senecan tragedy, winning is unstable, because losers refuse to cede power graciously. In *Troades*, Ulysses recognizes the need to kill Astyanax, despite his pity for the boy’s mother, Andromache; otherwise, he explains, the Trojans will rise again, and the cycle of revenge will continue.⁵⁷ Losers in turn fight back so tenaciously, because winners tend to overstep the limits of their victory, trampling the defeated beyond the bounds of endurance. In *Troades*, Pyrrhus insists on sacrificing Polyxena on the grave of his father, Achilles, despite

⁵⁷ *Tro.* 589-93, 736-38.

Agamemnon's advice that they should observe more restraint in victory.⁵⁸ Pyrrhus scoffs at all talk of moderation: *quodcumque libuit facere victori licet* ("The victor has a right to do whatever he pleases," 335). Aegisthus warns Clytemnestra of her likely fate, if she allows Agamemnon to keep Cassandra as his consort: *feresne thalami victa consortem tui? / at illa nolet. Ultimum est nuptae malum / palam maritam possidens paelex domum*. ("Will you endure being bested and sharing your marriage bed? *She* will not! The worst disaster for a wife is to have a mistress openly in control of the marital household" 256-58). Anyone who does try to share power ends up vulnerable to betrayal, as in the case of Thyestes's return; to trust a rival may seem noble initially, but in time proves to have been a naive misstep.

Shakespeare captures this sense of doomed zero-sum competition in his Roman plays in the rivalry between Coriolanus and Aufidius in *Coriolanus*, as well as that of Mark Antony and Octavian in *Antony and Cleopatra*. When Antony's lieutenant, Enobarbus, hears that Octavian has imprisoned Lepidus, the third man of their triumvirate, his response is telling. "Then, world, thou hast a pair of chaps [i.e. jaws], no more, / And throw between them all the food thou hast, / They'll grind the one the other" (3.5.13-15). Compromise is inconceivable, and defeat is intolerable. In *Troades*, Hecuba describes the murdered Priam as "blest" (*felix*), because he does not have to endure being led in triumph, and the chorus of Trojan woman assures her that they agree.⁵⁹ Shakespeare's Cleopatra inspires her attendants to join her in killing themselves by harping in like vein on the indignity of being displayed as a trophy. "Shall they hoist me up / And show me to the shouting varletry / Of censuring Rome?" (5.2.54-56) Brutus admits to Cassius that his desire to avoid this kind of public humiliation is the real reason why he later kills himself, after his defeat at Philippi. "If we lose this battle," Cassius asks, "you are contented to

⁵⁸ *Tro.* 203-348.

⁵⁹ *Tro.* 142-63.

be led in triumph / Through the streets of Rome?" (5.1.107-9) "No, Cassius, no," Brutus replies. "Think not, thou noble Roman, / That ever Brutus will go bound to Rome. / He bears too great a mind" (5.1.110-13).

"Too great a mind": the phrase invokes Aristotle's concept of *μεγαλοψυχία*, the pride of the "great-souled" man, and it also captures Brutus's participation in what Braden calls "Senecan" or simply "classical" selfhood.⁶⁰ Brutus is determined to remain "autarkic" to the end, author of all that happens to himself, even if that means killing himself. The same mindset drives the self-destructive revenge characteristic of Senecan tragedy. To commit suicide is an act of aggression, designed to rob the victor of some degree of agency, and to restore the dignity associated with that agency back to the defeated individual. Clytemnestra explains: *latus exigatur ensis et perimat duos; / misce cruorem, perde pereundo virum: / mors misera non est commori cum quo velis* ("The sword must be driven through your own side, if it cannot be otherwise, and slaughter two; mingle your blood, destroy your man by self-destruction: to die with someone you want to die is no wretched death.") (200-2).

Shakespeare, in contrast, and in keeping with the precepts of Christianity, sees dignity in accepting the limits of individual agency, as long as it is in the interests of compassion. The implicit model is Christ himself, who accepts the vulnerability of Incarnation, as well as the suffering of the Passion.⁶¹ The most important expression of this acceptance of intrinsic human weakness is forgiveness, which includes not only pardoning others, but also acknowledging and

⁶⁰ *Nic. Eth.* 4.3; cp. Braden (1985, 2).

⁶¹ See Auerbach, e.g., on the "parallel" between the *sermo humilis* and the Incarnation (2000, 51), or on St. Peter and "the mingling of styles" (2000, 41-42): "This mingling of styles is not dictated by an artistic purpose. On the contrary, it was rooted from the beginning in the character of Jewish-Christian literature; it was graphically and harshly dramatized through God's incarnation in a human being of the humblest social station, through his existence on earth amid humble everyday people and conditions, and through his Passion which, judged by earthly standards, was ignominious; and it naturally came to have ... a most decisive bearing upon man's conception of the tragic and the sublime."

making peace with one's own particular sins and failures.⁶² This about-face can occur in a comic vein: perhaps the best example is Benedick's final speech in *Much Ado about Nothing*. Benedick vows never to succumb to the siren call of love; never to give up his prized autonomy for the various indignities of marriage. Rather than admitting their obvious attraction, he and Beatrice persist instead in what Leonato calls "a kind of merry war" of verbal banter, taunting and insulting each other (1.1.55-56). The effect is a romantic variation on the more deadly competition at the heart of the Senecan tragic vision, an interminable conflict fuelled by pride, with no possible outcome other than mutual injury. By the end of the play, however, Benedick relents. He and Beatrice confess their feelings for each other, and he proclaims himself delighted to wed his quondam opponent. "In brief," he says, "since I do purpose to marry, I will think nothing to any purpose that the world can say against it; and therefore never flout at me for what I have said against it; for man is a giddy thing, and this is my conclusion" (5.4.103-7).

This type of *μετάνοια* ("repentance," *lit.*, "change of mind") appears in a more serious light in *King Lear*, as well as Shakespeare's final tragicomedies. When he wakes up, no longer mad, Lear begs Cordelia for forgiveness, and admits that he is only "a very foolish, fond old man" (4.7.60). So, too, Leontes, when he recovers from his bout of paranoia. In the second half of *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes accepts precisely the same kind of re-evaluation of himself which Eliot, at least, maintains that Othello never entirely lets himself see, even in death. He abandons his former delusions of omniscience, and he blames himself unequivocally for the death of his wife. In *The Tempest*, after his servant, Ariel, chides him for cruelty, Prospero decides not to exact any further revenge on his shipwrecked countrymen.

⁶² See Dodson-Robinson 2013, esp. 82, 90-92, and 97-100 for a reading of forgiveness in *Hamlet* vis-à-vis Senecan tragedy: "Forgiveness in *Hamlet* offers spiritual salvation in a materially corrupt universe. In allusive and often ironic ways, Christian virtues, juxtaposed with Senecan precedents, redeem 'the primal eldest curse' of betrayal" (82). ▲

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Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th' quick
 Yet, with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury
 Do I take part. The rarer action is
 In virtue than in vengeance. (5.1.25-8)

Not only does Prospero pardon his brother, Antonio, but he also gives up his god-like “rough magic,” not long after. This turn might seem as far from the Senecan ethos as it is possible to be. Miola describes it as “nothing less than a triumph over the Senecan self”: “Prospero achieves self-creation by self-denial rather than self-assertion, by surrender rather than conquest” (1992, 214).

By the end of his career, Shakespeare stands in clear-cut opposition to classical admiration of human pride: Aristotle’s *μεγαλοφυχία*. It would be reductive, however, to say therefore that Shakespeare altogether rejects the moral sensibility of Senecan tragedy. He is sensitive to Seneca’s own ambivalence; he turns Seneca against himself. Antiheroes such as Medea and Atreus are only one aspect of Senecan drama. Shakespeare picks up on another side, as well, a sympathy and perhaps even a longing for a very different value-system, more akin to that of Christianity. The marked hesitation of characters such as Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, momentarily restrained by feelings of pity and horror, allows Seneca to articulate an alternative vision of morality, one in which empathy and forgiveness are paramount, even if in the end these characters act otherwise. Shakespeare recognizes this ambiguity and works within it to bolster what in Seneca’s own vision tends to appear instead only as a recessive, hypothetical counterpoint.

For example, Leontes's repentance for his crimes against his own family is not wholly without precedent in Seneca's tragedies. Shakespeare appropriates and adapts the end of Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, when Hercules accepts that he must learn from his foster-father, Amphitryon, how to forgive himself. Another example is the similarity between the resolution of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and the point at which Seneca breaks off his possibly-unfinished tragedy, *Phoenissae*. At the abrupt close, the two brothers, Polynices and Eteocles, still smolder with hatred for each other. It seems inevitable that they will resume their struggle for power. Nevertheless, taking the play as it is, it ends with Jocasta having established peace in Thebes. Her feminine compassion for both parties proves more powerful, more dignified, even if only temporarily, than their spiteful ambition for individual *imperium*.

Shakespeare ends *Coriolanus* with an analogous reconsideration of the possible dignity of compassion, forgiveness, and feminine weakness. Volumnia's ability to evoke Coriolanus's pity spares Rome from being sacked; as with Jocasta in *Phoenissae*, her intervention proves far more effective than the use of brute force. Coriolanus vows, "all the swords / In Italy and her confederate arms / Could not have made this peace" (5.3.207-9). "Ladies," he says, "you deserve / To have a temple built you" (5.3.206-7). And in fact, his mother, Volumnia, and his wife, Virgilia, do re-enter Rome in triumph. Menenius proclaims, "This Volumnia / Is worth of consuls, senators, patricians, / A city full" (5.4.53-55).

Coriolanus's change of heart does lead to his death. Nevertheless, the same etiolated pity which leads him to abandon his march on Rome, and which he sees as a shameful weakness, appears in contrast to the audience as his most attractive quality. As A. D. Nuttall writes about Brutus, "his love for his wife and his grief at her death, 'affections' which Brutus is proud to be able to repress, actually redeem him as a human being" (2007, 185). The same kind of analysis

might well be applied to Seneca himself. He is redeemed, in Shakespeare's eyes, by his own philosophical inconsistencies. Shakespeare discerns Seneca's doubts about his sense of human dignity, and he expands those misgivings into a comprehensive and more hopeful vision of an alternative ethical universe: the moral world of Christianity.

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